

# HE PUT HIS RELIGION TO THE TEST

THE EDITOR GOES TO HEAR THE PASTOR OF THE LARGEST METHODIST CHURCH IN AMERICA AND WRITES ABOUT HIM AND HIS METHODS

(Editorial Correspondence.)

New York, N. Y., Sept. 25.—There are preachers and preachers, and when he goes to hear one who preaches the eternal verities as if they were not the light of life he is apt thereafter to let the church-going habit go into innocuous desuetude when he comes to this great city. The time was that there were a few great preachers here who attracted visitors to the metropolis to hear them preach. They added wonderful gifts of oratory to ability of a high order, and the Beechers and Talmedges were among the chief objects of interest to visitors. There are earned and great preachers here now, but none so widely known or with such popular gifts as Talmadge of Beecher. This is the hardest place in the world for a preacher to get a hearing. The hurry and rush of life, the presence of many visitors, the cosmopolitan character of the population, and the deplorable getting away from the old church-going habit have united to lessen the influence of the gospel ministry. Try however so much the minister finds so many other things crowding the lives of the people he finds it difficult to get a hearing for the eternal truth he has been called to deliver. If men will not go to church how can he deliver the message?

A few months ago the brilliant Rev. Dr. Aked resigned the pulpit of the biggest Baptist church here to go to California. He had large congregations here, but he said he felt he could not get hold of the people and that he was discouraged after giving his best to this big city. Pastors are short lived here for that very reason. And yet—is the fault all with the people? I think the chief fault is with the gadding spirit of the age and the materialism that has shut God out of so many lives, but is it not true as ever that if a great man has a message he will find a hearing, and if no way is opened to him, he will make a way and deliver his message?

I went to my hotel last Saturday night I was trying to decide where to go to church on the following day. On the previous Sunday I had heard Dr. Torrey, the well known evangelist who has preached in several North Carolina cities, and had in mind to go to hear Dr. Jowett, the singularly able Englishman who has made reputation at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian church. But inquiry gave the news that he had not returned from his vacation. In a quandary as to where I should go to church the next morning, or whether I should go at all I bought a Collier's and went to my room to read it. In a few minutes I had plunged into the third of a most interesting series of articles by Peter Clarge MacFarlane headed "Charles L. Goodell, Pastor of the Largest Methodist Church in the World." His picture attracted me, too, for he somewhat resembles former Lieutenant Governor W. D. Turner, of North Carolina. Hardly had I read the first column when it was clear that the use of my time on Sunday morning was determined, and fixed by the merest accident of finding MacFarlane's article in the casual purchase of a paper. Some people would say that this was a leading, others that it was a providential message to hear the preacher. No matter whether the chance reading of the paper was mere accidental or the leadings of the hands of Providence, I went to the church about which MacFarlane wrote so interestingly, and heard a truly excellent sermon upon old truths presented with clearness and impressiveness. It was the story that MacFarlane told in the first column of the story that caused me to go—a story I am going to quote here. If it impelled me to go to hear the man who put his religion to the test, will not the story also interest every reader of these lines. Here is the first part of MacFarlane's story about the preacher of the largest Methodist church in the city, given in his own words in Collier's:

"I am just out of State's prison!"

Dr. Goodell was in the midst of a revival service when a man stood up in the aisle and shouted these words at him in a voice that was harsh with excitement. The preacher paused in his discourse. The audience sat breathless and transfixed. Every glance was turned upon the man in the aisle. His head was bent forwards. The muscles of his face were set. The beam of his eye rested steadily upon the face of the minister. After a moment that was tense almost to painfulness, he repeated his statement and amplified it.

"I am just out of State's prison. I was guilty of all that was charged and of things which were never found out. You have been saying things here which are tremendously true or terribly false. You have been talking about some One who could save people from their sins. You said it made no difference how wicked a man

had been if he repented; that his sins would be blotted out. You said he would know he was forgiven and the sense of condemnation and guilt would be gone. Now, if you are saying what you do not know to be true, you ought to be ashamed. If you are holding out to a man like me a hope when there is no hope, you ought to stop it."

A Life or Death Bargain.

"At this point, without appearing to cease speaking, the man's voice seemed to die out of him and he stood silent, but with the intensity of his pose unrelieved—and his hungry eyes searching the face of the preacher. The sincerity of the man obviously entitled him to every consideration. There was tragedy in the lines of his face and in the tones of his voice. He took some steps nearer, to bring himself directly in front of the chancel, and, stretching out his hand in a gesture of appeal, said:

"I want to know, sir, whether you believe that this religion you are preaching can save a man like me. You said that Jesus saved a thief on the cross. Do you believe that Jesus can save a thief now?"

"The man's chin quivered and his eyes swam as again the voice died out of him. The entire audience was moved by the force of his appeal. Dr. Goodell confesses that he felt it to his heels, but he felt also his faith rise within him at the challenge. He reached across the chancel rail and took the appealing, outstretched hand in his, saying, in a voice for all to hear:

"My brother, I have honestly declared a message in which I believe. I cannot afford to preach a Gospel that is not true, and I will not. I am ready to make this contract with you. If you will meet the conditions which are laid down in the Bible, by which a man may come to God, and you do not find salvation, I will never again go into this pulpit to preach!"

"Something like a sigh swept over the audience as they realized the significance of the issues thus joined. As for the two men, they knelt together at the altar. There was an earnest exposition of the way of life by the doctor with the open Bible before him, with eager, earnest listening by the man. Thereafter the minister prayed fervently, and the seeker himself uttered a few broken sentences. There were other incidents of the revival service that night, but nothing comparable in importance to this one, and the congregation was dismissed in suppressed excitement. The service of the following night had been announced, but with the stipulation that Dr. Goodell would not preach except upon the condition which all now understood.

"Will It Work?"

"As the congregation passed out and left the doctor alone, and finally the man who had challenged his Gospel so strangely was also gone. Dr. Goodell began to feel a sinking at the heart. He realized that he had risked all the future of his ministry upon the chance issue of affairs in the soul of a highly emotional creature who had strayed into his meeting. Yet he reasoned with himself that he had done right and only what an honest preacher could do. He believed that redemption began here and now. If this man—if any honest seeker couldn't get it, then either there was no such thing or else he, the preacher, did not know how to proclaim it, and might therefore as well cease to preach as to continue.

"However, Dr. Goodell did not sleep much that night, and the next day was a restless one for him. Some of his parishioners thought he had been too rash and came to tell him so, but he withstood their urgings. Night came, and the hour for service. Dr. Goodell was at the church, but did not enter the pulpit. Instead he sat just inside the chancel rail with his eyes upon the door. Would the man come? Would he come a conqueror or a miserable failure, confessing defeat? The time to preach at length arrived, but the man did not. Dr. Goodell announced another hymn, and the congregation stood and sang:

"There is a fountain filled with blood," etc.

"As the last note died hasty steps were heard in the vestibule, then the doors swung and a man—the man—with hair disheveled and his features dripping perspiration, rushed down the aisle.

"The car broke down," he exclaimed, breathlessly, "but—his voice rose in hoarse notes of triumph—you can go ahead and preach!"

"Dr. Goodell's life has been full of crises like this. He is always willing to test the power of his ministry afresh by that one authoritative standard of this pragmatic day: 'Will it work?' In his youthful days, he, a shrewd Massachusetts Yankee boy,

halted between business and the ministry. He resolved to try out his preaching, saying: 'If God wants me in this work he will prove it by giving me visible results.'

"In other words, he asked of his Gospel, as the convict later asked of it: 'Will it work?'

"It did work; and young Goodell entered upon his first pastorate, which was somewhere in or around Boston. Still the young preacher put his ministry on probation. Again the results came. The church grew beyond all precedent. But three years was the ecclesiastical limit of a Methodist pastorate in those days, and Goodell was soon tested in another field. The results came as before. There was no question about it. The earnest young minister was a marvelous man winner."

New York city has been called "the graveyard of ministers." Many men with reputations and success have been swallowed up or lost in this big city. Dr. Goodell came to his present church here fresh from victories in other important places, but he was warned by not a few friends when he came here that he would find New York "very different," but instead of being discouraged he replied:

"God is the same in New York as in every other city in the world. . . . Before there shall be a failure in Calvary Church there will be a funeral in Calvary's parsonage. . . . I will die in the streets before there shall be a failure of God's great work in New York City."

But there was no failure. On the first Sunday in February, 1905, which was the first day upon which he extended the general invitation of the Gospel after a period of evangelistic preaching, there were three hundred and sixty-four applicants for membership, which, so far as Dr. Goodell knows, is the largest number of persons ever received at one time into the fellowship of one Protestant congregation. The membership of the church has grown from 1,500 to 3,200. Here is Mr. MacFarlane's story of how his success has been won, and it should be widely read:

"Yet Dr. Goodell's evangelistic methods are simple. There is no taint of professionalism about them. They are accompanied by no fanfare of corsets. There is no throbbing of the deep bass drum. There is no importation of professional exhorters or multiplication of evangelistic stage personages and stage properties, with a chorus of singers and talkers and workers who are uncannily skilled in pandering to the psychology of the crowd. Instead, Dr. Goodell simply devotes one month of every pastoral year, the month of January, usually, to evangelistic preaching, every single night of the Gospel as he understands it. The service may be relieved now and then or embellished by the preaching of a neighboring pastor, but for the most part the doctor is his own evangelist, and his own missionary as well, for he spends the day before the night of the evangelistic sermon in going among the people and personally persuading them to the better life. Nor is he any respecter of persons at such times. His friends tell of an occasion when a self-made merchant and manufacturer, whose final triumph had come in the erection of a great business block, which was filled, floor on floor to the very top, with goods of his own production, which were there assembled for sale, had personally conducted Dr. Goodell through the entire establishment, and as he went, told the story of his business life. The minister heard him through with sympathy, even entered into his enthusiasm over each victory, and, when the narrator had finished, as they stood at the top of the store, on the very pinnacle of his achievements, as it were, asked him:

"How about God? And your duty to him? God, who gave you all this prosperity?"

"Nor did the matter end with what might baldly sound like an impertinent question. As the minister asked it, the question was not impertinent; and there, amid the heterogeneity of a merchandise emporium, the power of it all placed his hand in the minister's and pledged himself to walk toward heaven."

I sometimes wonder whether if all preachers would put their preaching to the test as did Dr. Goodell and have the "Thou art the man" more as they deal with their hearers and with men they seek out away from their churches—I say I wonder if there would be so many empty pews and if so many business men would stay away from church. If I were a preacher—and it is the highest calling and I would have felt lifted up if called to that highest service—I think I would preach more to folks who do not go to church than to those who go to church—that is I would go to see the men in my community who did not attend church and give the personal message to the man as is related of this New York preacher. Not long ago there came out a popular novel

based upon the saying, "Everybody is lonesome," and acting upon that theory a character in the story walked into the hearts of many by seeking to relieve a measure of their lonesomeness. Isn't it true that everybody needs sympathy and an invitation to climb into the higher life of Christianity? How many would enter that life if a preacher, baptized with vitalizing faith, would personally away from church take them by the hand and teach them the first steps? That question is one which is answered in many converts by every big preacher who has followed that course.

But—to return to the preacher and his methods. I found that in his story Mr. MacFarlane had given a pen picture of the man and told of his method so much better than I can give it that I copy here his story of his visit to Dr. Goodell's Calvary Methodist Church, way up at 129th street and Seventh avenue. He writes of his visit to the church as follows:

The church is a plain structure, plainly furnished, and the preacher is a plain man. His personality is singularly unobtrusive at the first. There were two ministers in the pulpit, and I found it difficult to decide which was Dr. Goodell, and was almost at the conclusion that neither was he. Then, there was a forceful looking person in the pulpit chair nearest me with short bristling pompadour and a pugnaous chin. I looked him over carefully. It was not the face of a pulpit orator. The features were those of an executive mind. Patience and power were strangely mingled in them. But the spirit of the fighter bristled out of him. He was the sort of person you would like to have for a Subway or an "L" guard on Sunday night when the hoodlums started "fought-housing" among the returning pleasure-seekers, for he would have quelled such impatient riots single-handed. Later it developed that this was Dr. Goodell.

When he arose to speak, if a Hibernicism be permissible, his rarely unassertive manner asserted itself. The man's voice and bearing were simple. He made but the slightest use of personality. There was no suggestion of magnetism. He made no quick movements. There was not one crackling, vibrant note in his tones. He seemed to be afraid of attracting attention to his presence there upon the platform. Only he kept on talking, and one must admit that his sentences began to be pungent. "The Practice of Religion" was his subject. He began soon to be saying: "Religion is the relation of the soul to God, and the practice of it is the practice of the presence of God."

God's religion is not a camp fire or a ritual or a creed, but a good life, growing into a good character. . . . Theology is only a way of thinking; religion is a way of living."

"Still, the man was disappointing. He plodded forward almost monotonously with his entirely uninflected discourse. There was no possibility of making an interesting personality story for Collier's readers out of such a preacher. I had been misled in coming to hear him. Away down in my heart a very unwhimsical sentiment framed itself, a sentiment which if vocalized would have sounded like the word of Ashdod: 'Stung!' Yes, I was stung. I looked around upon the audience in a kind of sympathy. They were stung, too, poor people, and there were so very, very many of them, rank after rank of seats, all of them full; the spaces back under the gallery full also; and the gallery pitching upward on three sides of the auditorium, was banked with pews that were filled, the women's hats blooming like some new hanging gardens. But reflecting that these people had been coming here like this Sunday after Sunday for nine years, it seemed patent that they could not have been deceived by a false lure. Then I fell to considering faces. Every eye was on the preacher. The hearers were in a waiting mood. They sat like candidates submitting to the attempted bewitchments of a mesmerist. They were going to give him their spell a fair chance to 'take' if it would. I turned to the companion at my side, who was also hearing Dr. Goodell for the first time, and found another pair of eyes that were fixed and motionless. The spell was taking in that quarter also.

"As for the preacher, he had actually moved around on to the other side of the pulpit, and was stretching out his hand in a gesture. His eye had lightened, his voice had become animated; the flow of personality was apparent. For a moment these details were noted, and then I, too, ceased to see and listened only. Once, by a violent wrench of the will, an eye was cast back over the auditorium. The people might have been figures of wax. They were listening, listening, listening! with all the souls of them listening! That is the word, listening! listening! not to an orator, not to phrases; not stirred by illustrations, though there were illustrations; not moved by sweeps of passion, though there was passion; not bound by a spell, though there was a spell; but listening—not to a sermon but to truth, not to homiletic forms but to an assimilable spiritual message. In the last ten minutes of that sermon such a witchery lay upon the people as David Warfield himself may cast, but it was all quite artless. They of Harlem who till this church, some in

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